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ABSTRACT

Along with assessing the value of a program, evaluations should aid in decision making, support change management, and improve processes. For an evaluation to effect change, three conditions should occur: informing, collaborating, and mixing. The evaluation of a Wheaton College (Massachusetts) graduation requirement that students complete a minimum of at least one out-of-class learning experience provides an example of an evaluation that served as a catalyst for change. The requirement moved from a five-step prescribed, structured reflection process to a three-step student-centered reflection process integrated into the academic community. As the example from Wheaton College shows, for an evaluation to have effective use, it has to be a shared, collaborative educational venture between the evaluator and those involved in the program. (Contains 16 references.) (SLD)

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Evaluation as a Catalyst for Change

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Evaluation as a Catalyst for Change
A.A.H.E. Assessment Conference 2001

Evaluators want the findings and recommendations from their studies to be helpful to those who commissioned the evaluation and to those who are affected by it. Along with assessing the value and worth of a program, evaluations should aid decision-making, support change management, and improve processes. Many evaluators feel that they also have a responsibility to help others understand evaluation approaches and procedures. Each of these is a component of evaluation use.

At Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts, an evaluation of a graduation requirement that students complete a minimum of one out-of-class learning experience (e.g., campus leadership, community service, internship, on- or off-campus job, practicum) and a required reflection essay served as a catalyst for change. Evaluation data were and continue to be used to refine and assess the requirement. The requirement moved from a five-step, prescribed structured reflection process to a three-step, student-centered reflection process integrated into the academic community. Wheaton serves as example of evaluation structures that facilitate evaluation use. These are described below and may be applied to other settings.

Evaluation use is a multidimensional concept that has been studied considerably over the last thirty years (Caracelli & Preskill, 2000). Although evaluation utilization is commonly thought of in terms of influence of results or evaluation data, it also includes other facets. Traditionally, evaluation utilization is thought to have four components: instrumental, conceptual, process, and symbolic (Johnson, 1998). Instrumental is results-based use. Conceptual use refers to the development of understanding, opinions, and attitudes towards a program and/or evaluation in general based on experiences with past evaluations. When behavior changes accompany cognitive understanding, process use occurs. For instance, one begins "to think like an evaluator." Symbolic use occurs when results are used for political self-interest, such as to legitimize a preset opinion or earlier decisions, and can be problematic. Recently, Kirkhart (2000) conceptualized use in terms of a three-dimensional theory of influence (source of influence, intention, time frame).

For an evaluation to affect change or to move from the file drawer to active use, three conditions should occur. These are informing, collaborating, and mixing. Informing participants about evaluation thinking, approaches, and procedures, collaborating with users during all stages of an evaluation, and mixing evaluation approaches and methods should be inherent to an evaluation. Although they are discussed separately, the three conditions are not discrete. Rather than follow sequentially like hop-scotch, they over lap and move back and forth.

Informing participants or potential users does not imply a didactic teaching approach, but using informal and formal mechanisms to learn what potential users already know and feel about evaluation and to guide them towards an understanding of evaluation methods, approaches, and use in their and other settings. For instance, at Wheaton's Filene Center where students may

go to facilitate completion of their graduation requirement, staff are interested in self improvement and requested an evaluation workshop soon after the evaluation began. This request made informing easy. During a workshop, staff participated in exercises adapted from Michael Q. Patton (1997). One of these exercises involved free association with the words, evaluation and evaluate, which revealed fears and perceptions. Metaphors for evaluation helped everyone understand how each other viewed evaluation. At a later point, some faculty and upper-level administration went through a similar exercise. These early exercises relieved a lot of tension and helped the evaluator make sure that concerns would be addressed. The activities also provided an opportunity for the evaluator to share her viewpoints and expertise on evaluation. On-going information sharing (staff to evaluator/evaluator to staff) since the first workshop is less formal.

Informing can occur during workshops and at less formal times. Because many in higher education have experience with experimental research, the differences between evaluation and research, how evaluation is cyclical, and multiple purposes of evaluation are topics for discussion. Wheaton college and the program staff already have a tendency towards reflection and self-evaluation; integrating evaluation into day-to-day operations takes on a strengthening rather than introductory approach. For instance, evaluation's systematic, representative, and concrete approach to gathering data supplement anecdotal observations.

Collaboration should start at the beginning of an evaluation and continue throughout. While the amount of participation depends on one's role in the program or evaluation, communication with everyone is essential. Determining what to evaluate, what questions to answer, and how to evaluate is a joint effort with key people. It is also an opportunity to instill evaluation "thinking." Focusing, planning, and clarifying together help facilitate understanding and acceptance of an evaluation. The following questions that were posed at the start of the Wheaton's evaluation can be asked for any evaluation:

- what is the program to be evaluated – its goals, objectives, activities, resources, its context?
- what will be evaluated?
- what are the purposes of the evaluation?
- who wants and needs the evaluation?
- who will use the results?
- how will the results be used?
- what types of decisions will be made?
- what questions need to be answered or issues should be addressed?
- what type of information is needed? and whether it is feasible to gather that type of information
- what type of information will be accepted? e.g., anecdotes, statistics
- is there really enough programmatic emphasis to have an effect? where is the greatest emphasis?

After answering the questions, develop and prioritize a series of evaluation questions and select related methods of data collection. Some people find an evaluation timeline for evaluation questions and related data collection helpful. Reporting of findings from data collection is shared, frequent, and timely.

When the evaluation emphasis is on what is most appropriate to conducting a good evaluation or what best answers evaluation questions, a mix of methods and approaches is suitable. Influenced by utilization-focused (Patton, 1997), objectives-based, pragmatic, and quasi-experimental approaches, Wheaton's evaluation is an eclectic mix. The Standards for Evaluation (Joint Committee, 1994) guide the evaluation which is both formative and summative in nature. Qualitative (e.g., open-ended interviews) and quantitative (e.g., published surveys)methods are used. For instance, open-ended interviews and focus groups about the value of documentation of out-of-class experiences, lead to structured questions for members of the senior class about the documentation of their experiences.

Example Caveat. As a result of evaluation data, changes were made to the documentation process. These changes are now part of the evaluation. While informing, collaborating, and mixing played a part this change, without the support of the Wheaton administration and a culture of self evaluation, the change would be less smooth. For many involved, the findings support what they find and/or wish would happen. Receptiveness to evaluation in general is a key to use.

For an evaluation to have effective use, it has to be a shared, collaborative, educational venture between the evaluator and those involved in the program. Using approaches and methods that are appropriate to evaluation questions rather than adherence to a favorite pedagogy can provide comprehensive understanding of how a program works and what its effects are.

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